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JEREMIAH THE HISTORIAN. THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH AS A SOURCE FOR THE HISTORY OF THE NEAR EAST IN THE TIME OF NEBUCHADNEZZAR.¹

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BACKGROUND

The Book of Jeremiah was formerly regarded as one of the most important sources for the history of the city state of Jerusalem during the time of Nebuchadnezzar II (604-562 BCE).

However, following the recent history aporia in prophetic research some scholars now claim that the prophetic corpus, similar to the rest of the texts of the Hebrew Bible, is a late literary creation of Persian, or even Hellenistic, times. Furthermore, a few also believe that these late prophetic texts are ‘purely literary’, and that they have no connections whatsoever with any historical prophetic phenomenon in ancient Israel. Consequently, the Book of Jeremiah cannot be used for the reconstruction of contemporary historical events.

¹ I am happy to present this modest contribution to Robert Gordon; a great scribe and a wise man, as well as a good friend.

Even if many of the changes that are taking place within prophetic studies are necessary, we should beware of some of their possible negative consequences. Elsewhere, I have discussed a few of the methodological and theoretical implications of some recent trends in relation to the Book of Jeremiah. (Barstad 2009).

To reject the importance of the Book of Jeremiah as an historical source is not only unfortunate, but also unnecessary. It represents, indeed, an obvious example of how the baby has been thrown out with the bathwater.

The present contribution will attempt to demonstrate why the Book of Jeremiah should still be regarded as one of our most important ‘contemporary’ sources for the history of the Near East in the 500s BCE.

It is probably superfluous to add that an adequate discussion of what may or what may not be historically correct in the book of Jeremiah would require a whole monograph. This is due to the length and complexity of the sources. For the far less ambitious enterprise at hand it is therefore necessary to choose only a couple of texts from Jeremiah.

Also, this is no place to discuss more fully other Jeremiah texts that may throw light upon the few passages that have been selected. Nor can the relationship between the Book of Jeremiah and the histories of the Deuteronomists and the Chroniclers be taken into

consideration. Instead, only extra biblical contemporary (as well as a few later sources) will be referred to.

THE NEAR EAST IN THE FIRST MILLENNIUM

The Near East of the first millennium BCE was dominated by the Mesopotamian empires of Assyria and Babylonia, the typical arch enemies. These political giants fought for hegemony assisted by a rich variety of shifting allies (Joannès 2004). It should not be forgotten, however, that throughout the millennium, Egypt is, more often than not, a major player both on the international arena, as well as behind the scene. This position was not only a result of Egypt's antiquity, size and wealth, but it was also based on the country's long standing relations with the Levant, both diplomatic and commercial. If Egypt is not taken into consideration, a truly scant picture of the Middle East in the first millennium will emerge.

Among historians who have discussed Egypt in the 1st millennium BCE, at varying length, we find: Gozzoli 2006; Grimal 1995: 311-382; Helck 1968: 231-257; James 2000; Lloyd 1994; 2003; Taylor 2003. For the present purpose, it is the 26th ('Saite'), dynasty that is relevant.

This study attempts to look upon the book of Jeremiah 'from the outside'. For this reason, I do not, with a few exceptions, refer to the vast literature in this area by biblical scholars. Useful references to the Mesopotamian context of the Hebrew Bible in the time of

Nebuchadnezzar by a biblical scholar are found in Alberty 2001. As for Egypt, Redford 1992 is much referred to. The most recent book length contribution that I have seen is Schipper 1999.

THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

One might say, from a historical point of view, that the most important single episode leading to the stories described in Jeremiah is the seizing of the Babylonian throne by the Chaldean Nabopolassar (626 - 605 BCE) in 626 BCE (Kuhrt 1995: II, 540-546; Oates 2000: 162-164, 173-189; Alberty 2001: 49-51; Joannès 2004: 122-123).

What happened after this event was, to the best of our knowledge, that the Assyrians made an alliance with Egypt who was equally interested in solving the 'Chaldean problem'. The Assyrian province Carchemish had allowed Egyptian troops to help out against the Medes and the Babylonians. Apparently, Egyptian forces operated inside Mesopotamia from some time after 600 BCE.

A well preserved tablet in the British Museum (Grayson Chronicle 4) tells the story of the later years of Nabopolassar (Grayson 1975: 97-98). Here, we learn of the activities of the Egyptian army in Mesopotamia, and of how the Egyptians and conquered cities and defeated the Babylonians.

One could say that the alliance of Assyrians and Egyptians shows how desperate the situation was. Assyria was no close friend of Egypt. For a very long time indeed the collective memory of Egypt had kept in mind the Assyrian pillages of Thebes in 664 BCE (Gozzoli 2006: 216 and 270-271). Possibly, the official, but quite unhistorical, Egyptian first millennium BCE view that the pharaohs again and again had defeated the Assyrians was helpful in making such alliances with the Egyptians possible (Gozzoli 2006: 214 n. 111).

However, the Egyptian army was completely defeated by the Babylonian crown prince Nebuchadnezzar at the battle of Carchemish in 605 BCE (Helck 1980: 340; Lloyd 2003: 372).

In a wider perspective, the battle of Carchemish belongs within the larger historical context of the 'Fall of Assyria'. This topic has been dealt with by many. Among them we find Oates 2000; Machinist 1995; Zawadzki 1988.

JEREMIAH AND THE BATTLE OF CARCHEMISH (605 BCE)

An often quoted text in the Book of Jeremiah informs us of the battle of Carchemish. I quote Jer. 46.1-12 (RSV).

1. The word of the LORD which came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the nations.
2. About Egypt. Concerning the army of Pharaoh Neco, king of Egypt,

which was by the river Euphrates at Carchemish and which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon defeated in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah: 3. Prepare buckler and shield, and advance for battle! 4. Harness the horses; mount, O horsemen! Take your stations with your helmets, polish your spears, put on your coats of mail! 5. Why have I seen it? They are dismayed and have turned backward. Their warriors are beaten down, and have fled in haste; they look not back - terror on every side! says the LORD. 6. The swift cannot flee away, nor the warrior escape; in the north by the river Euphrates they have stumbled and fallen. 7. Who is this, rising like the Nile, like rivers whose waters surge? 8. Egypt rises like the Nile, like rivers whose waters surge. He said, I will rise, I will cover the earth, I will destroy cities and their inhabitants. 9. Advance, O horses, and rage, O chariots! Let the warriors go forth: men of Ethiopia and Put who handle the shield, men of Lud, skilled in handling the bow. 10. That day is the day of the Lord GOD of hosts, a day of vengeance, to avenge himself on his foes. The sword shall devour and be sated, and drink its fill of their blood. For the Lord GOD of hosts holds a sacrifice in the north country by the river Euphrates. 11. Go up to Gilead, and take balm, O virgin daughter of Egypt! In vain you have used many medicines; there is no healing for you. 12. The nations have heard of your shame, and the earth is full of your cry; for warrior has stumbled against warrior; they have both fallen together.

The contemporary source for the Battle of Carchemish is the Babylonian Chronicle. The quote below is taken from the Babylonian Chronicle 5 in Grayson's version (Grayson 1975: 99)

[The twenty-first year]: The king of Akkad stayed home (while) Nebuchadnezzar (II), his eldest son (and) the crown prince, mustered [the army of Akkad]. He took his army's lead and marched to Carchemish which is on the bank of the Euphrates. He crossed the river [*to encounter the army of Egypt*] which was encamped at Carchemish. [...] They did battle together. The army of Egypt retreated before him. He inflicted a [defeat] upon them (and) finished them off completely. In the district of Hamath the army of Akkad overtook the remainder of the army of [Egypt which] managed to escape [from] the defeat and which was not overcome. They [the army of Akkad] inflicted a defeat upon them (so that) a single (Egyptian) man [did not return] home. At that time Nebuchadnezzar (II) conquered all of Ha[ma]th.

Assyriologists agree on dating this event to 605 BCE. This implies that Nebuchadnezzar was still a crown prince when he crushed the Egyptian army at Carchemish. His father, Nabopolassar, who was then in his twenty-first regnal year, was staying in Babylon. Having, subsequently, overtaken and wiped out the rest of the Egyptian army, Nebuchadnezzar conquered all of Hamath. The name Hamath in the last line of the text above is restored, but, as we see, Hamath does appear in line 7.

When reading this Akkadian text, the historical importance of Jer. 46 becomes clear.

Even if we are dealing with a late poetic text, reworked and with more than one agenda, it undoubtedly refers to historical circumstances known from extra biblical sources.

Thus, there can be little doubt that the historical information found in Jer. 46.2 ‘About Egypt. Concerning the army of Pharaoh Neco, king of Egypt, which was by the river Euphrates at Carchemish and which Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon defeated in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah ...’ refers to a historically true past event.

Other relevant parts of Jer. 46 could have been looked into. For instance, we find in this text a remarkable, indirect description of the Egyptian army. Other interesting issues to the historian would be the study of allies in light of other Jeremiah texts and other prophetic and historiographical texts of the Hebrew bible in order to compare them with contemporary Near Eastern sources.

Even if the Pharaoh in question is certain, the personal name Necho does not appear in the contemporary Akkadian text quoted above. Here, consequently, Jeremiah gives us a piece of unique historical information. For Necho in the Hebrew bible, see besides Jer. 46 and 27 also 2 Kgs 23.29; 2 Kgs 24, 2 Chron. 35.21-22, and 2 Chron. 36. However, the usefulness of any of these latter documents for the historian cannot be taken for granted. Each and every text has to be investigated separately.

At the same time, we should not forget that these texts in Jeremiah are not much different from a multitude of other texts in the Hebrew Bible. The prophetic books are full of 'indirect' historical information like the one that we find in Jer. 46.

Here, I can only mention a couple of illustrating texts. One good example is Ezek. 27. This prophetic word of doom against Tyre in the form of a satirical lament gives us also at the same time important historical knowledge of the trade network of Tyre and of Phoenician economy (Liverani 1991). When Amos 1-2 is studied against the background of Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions, it appears that the names of the foreign city states mentioned in this text do not represent later additions to the texts, but refer to a historical coalition against the Assyrians around 770 BCE (Barstad 2007).

NECHO IN EGYPTIAN SOURCES

Nekau\Necao\Necho II (Egyptian Wahibre) of the 26th Dynasty ruled from 610-595 BCE. One reason why 'contemporary' Akkadian and Hebrew documents are so important for Necho is that indigenous Egyptian sources are practically non existent (Redford 1982; Gozzoli 2006).

Unfortunately, no military Egyptian texts from the period of Necho II have reached us. Necho's fragmentary inscription from Elephantine with a list of boats for a possibly Nubian expedition is the only such text that has survived for posterity. As a matter of

fact, there are no military records preserved from the 26th dynasty from between the Libyan campaign of Necho's father, Psammetichus I (664-610 BCE) and the Nubian campaign of Psammetichus II (595-589 BCE) (Gozzoli 2006: 101). This unfortunate circumstance is possibly caused by the not unknown phenomenon of a collective *damnatio memoriae* (Gozzoli 2006: 177 n. 98).

Since we have no evidence from contemporary Egypt that bear witness to Necho's campaigns, a lot of discussion has gone into the question of Necho's whereabouts before during and after the battle at Carchemish. However, as there are no sources, it goes without saying that some of these reflections may appear as somewhat speculative (Redford 1992: 447-455).

One possible clue for this debate was offered by Elmar Edel. He reminds us that the Weidner Chronicle not only refers to king Jehoiachin of Judah as a resident of Babylon, but that there are references to other foreign kings, including Egyptian pharaohs. The name Necho, too, appears in the list (Edel 1978: 18; 1980: 25).

NECHO IN HERODOTUS

Information about the battle at Carchemish in 605 BCE is also found in Herodotus (484?-425? BCE). Egyptologists vary in their evaluation of the historical value of Herodotus's writings on Egypt. As for Necho, there seems to be a unanimous view that Herodotus is not very reliable. Herodotus' Egyptian *logoi* are recently and very competently dealt with

by, among others, Roberto Gozzoli (Gozzoli 2006: 155-189) and Alan Lloyd (Lloyd 1975-1988).

Gozzoli claims that the use of Herodotus as a historical source for ancient Egypt is highly problematic (Gozzoli 2006: 155-189). Lloyd, too, warns against the problem with the historical veracity of Herodotus's Egyptian *logoi* throughout his useful commentary (Lloyd 1975-1988: vols. 1-3). However, Lloyd is occasionally more open to drawing historical conclusions from Herodotus.

Considering his relatively long reign (610-595 BCE) and his importance, Necho is relatively short in Herodotus. He is dealt with in chapters 158-159 of Book II. It is likely that the somewhat short description is caused by an almost complete lack of Egyptian sources for Necho II (see above). Also, most of the text in Herodotus discusses the canal that Necho was supposed to have built. The topic of the canal has been discussed thoroughly by above all Lloyd (Lloyd 1977, 1988: 149-158)

Important to us is above all the following piece of information in II, 159, not dealing with the canal building.

He then turned his attention to war; he had triremes built, some on the Mediterranean coast, others on the Arabian gulf, where the docks are still to be seen, and made use of his new fleets as occasion arose; and in addition he attacked

the Syrians by land and defeated them at Magdolus, afterwards taking Gaza, a large town in Syria (Herodotus 2003: 161).

As we see, this is not a very accurate description of Necho's war activities. For details, one should consult the very thorough commentary by Lloyd (Lloyd 1988: 161-165). The 'Syrians' would be a reference to the Chaldeans (Lloyd 1988: 163).

Magdolus has wrongly been identified with Megiddo (cf. 2 Kgs 23:29 and 2 Chron.35:20-23). However, the information here that Necho killed the Judean king Josiah at Megiddo is found only in the Hebrew bible (which is also Josephus's source). The identification of Herodotus's Magdolus with Megiddo is simply wrong. As has been demonstrated beyond doubt most recently by Lloyd (1988: 161-163), Magdolus should be identified with the Egyptian city of Migdol (on Migdol in Jeremiah, see below). This fortified city constituted the boundary towards the north east during the 26th dynasty, and was an important entry into Egypt (Redford 1992: 457).

The most important question in relation to Herodotus's Necho concerns his use of sources. Where does he get his information from? When there are no quality sources for him to build upon, he will be less interesting to the historian. In the case of Necho, the caveat by Lloyd should be underlined. Lloyd writes about the Necho chapters: 'Although we must make allowance for a dash of autopsy in II, 158, the subject-matter derives pre-eminently from Gk. oral tradition (cf. II, 154, 4) and reflects the selectivity, tendency to

exaggeration and the world-attitudes which we would expect of such a source' (Lloyd 1988: 149).

Nevertheless, on the whole, we must take care when making statements concerning the value of Herodotus as a historical source. The more one studies Herodotus, the more one realizes that the work does contain a lot of historical information. However, similar to when we work with the Hebrew bible as a history book, we should never make sweeping statements. Each and every piece of information in Herodotus has to be looked into separately, and to be compared with other sources. This applies also for the Egyptian *logoi*.

Despite their scepticism, both Lloyd and Gozzoli endeavour to reconstruct Necho's 'Asiatic campaigns'. Lloyd makes (mainly) use of the Neo-Babylonian Chronicle, the Hebrew Bible, and Josephus (Lloyd (1988: 159). Lloyd's attempt is masterfully done. As he tends to suggest more facts than Gozzoli, I follow here Gozzoli's 'Lloyd version'. According to Gozzoli (building on Lloyd), Necho's 'Asiatic campaigns' can be assumed to have been the following:

610-609 BCE, Necho was an ally of the crumbling Assyrian Empire. He overcame Josiah king of Judah at Megiddo. Following battles between the Egyptians and Chaldeans (607-605 BCE), Necho was defeated by the Chaldean king Nebuchadnezzar at Carchemish in 605 BCE. Following this defeat, the Egyptians lost control of the Levant that was taken over momentarily by the Chaldeans. The last stage (604-595 BCE) of Necho's campaigns

to the Levant is dominated by the growing power of the Chaldeans, and the pharaoh is trying to make alliances against Nebuchadnezzar with subdued states, like Judah (Gozzoli 2006: 178 n 102, with literature).

NECHO IN JOSEPHUS

Occasionally, Josephus has been brought into the discussion about Necho's campaigns. Ant. 10. 84-87 (Josephus 1937) deals with the battle of Carchemish. The standard commentary on the late period in Josephus is now Begg 2000. However, in this particular case, Josephus is not very useful mainly for two reasons.

Begg has shown how Josephus's Josiah story is based exclusively on the biblical texts of Kings and Chronicles (in a Greek version). This means that there is nothing in Josephus that is not also found in the Hebrew bible. Moreover, due to the fact that Josephus quite freely rewrites his sources in order to create his own Josiah figure, his version of the story becomes too biased to be of much value in relation to the historical Necho (Begg 2000: 493-497).

JEREMIAH AND THE CIVIL WAR IN EGYPT AFTER 570 BCE

Jer. 46.13-28 (RSV). 13. The word which the LORD spoke to Jeremiah the prophet about the coming of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon to smite the land of Egypt:

14. Declare in Egypt, and proclaim in Migdol; proclaim in Memphis (מִנְיָ) and Tahpanhes; Say, Stand ready and be prepared, for the sword shall devour round about you. 15. Why has Apis fled? Why did not your bull stand? Because the LORD thrust him down. 16. Your multitude stumbled and fell, and they said one to another, Arise, and let us go back to our own people and to the land of our birth, because of the sword of the oppressor. 17. Call the name of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, Noisy one who lets the hour go by. 18. As I live, says the King, whose name is the LORD of hosts, like Tabor among the mountains, and like Carmel by the sea, shall one come. 19. Prepare yourselves baggage for exile, O inhabitants of Egypt! For Memphis shall become a waste, a ruin, without inhabitant. 20. A beautiful heifer is Egypt, but a gadfly from the north has come upon her. 21. Even her hired soldiers in her midst are like fatted calves; yea, they have turned and fled together, they did not stand; for the day of their calamity has come upon them, the time of their punishment. 22. She makes a sound like a serpent gliding away; for her enemies march in force, and come against her with axes, like those who fell trees. 23. They shall cut down her forest, says the LORD, though it is impenetrable, because they are more numerous than locusts; they are without number. 24. The daughter of Egypt shall be put to shame, she shall be delivered into the hand of a people from the north. 25. The LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, said: Behold, I am bringing punishment upon Amon of Thebes, and Pharaoh, and Egypt and her gods and her kings, upon Pharaoh and those who trust in him. 26. I will deliver them into the hand of those who seek their life, into the hand of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon and his officers. Afterward Egypt shall be inhabited as in the days of old, says the

LORD. 27. But fear not, O Jacob my servant, nor be dismayed, O Israel; for lo, I will save you from afar, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return and have quiet and ease, and none shall make him afraid. 28. Fear not, O Jacob my servant, says the LORD, for I am with you. I will make a full end of all the nations to which I have driven you, but of you I will not make a full end. I will chasten you in just measure, and I will by no means leave you unpunished.

This text, too, provides us with a lot of important historical information, and quite a few issues could have been looked at in more detail. On the importance of Migdol during the 26th Dynasty (also called the Saite period), see above. The central role of Memphis in that same period (664-525 BCE), is known from contemporary Egyptian sources (Gozzoli 2006: 104).

As a whole, Jer. 46.13-28 describes the circumstances at the eve of the civil war that took place in Egypt after 570 BCE, following the death of Pharaoh Apries (Greek form of Egyptian name Haaibra). Apries (589-570 BCE), in Jer. 45.30 called Hophra, was a contemporary of Nebuchadnezzar (604-562 BCE). Formerly an enemy, he later made an alliance with Nebuchadnezzar in order to attack Egypt, and to regain the rule from the usurper Amasis. Apries was killed, however, and Amasis (Ahmose II) was to stay in power for a very long period indeed (570-526 BCE).

The main Egyptian source for these events is the Amasis stele from Elephantine, discussed in detail most recently by Gozzoli (Gozzoli 2009: 101-103. See also de Meulenaere 1975; Edel 1978; Spalinger 1979; Leahy 1988; Redford 1992: 464-469).

Herodotus, too, has a large section on Amasis and Apries and the civil war in Egypt after 570 BCE. According to Gozzoli, this part of Herodotus is the only piece of information that can be called historical regarding the 26th Dynasty. Here, Herodotus is basically retelling the information found on the Elephantine stele of Amasis (Gozzoli 2006: 189, 101-103).

One particular matter relates to Nebuchadnezzar's campaign into Egypt, referred to explicitly in Jer. 46.13. This event is referred to in the Book of Jeremiah, the Amasis stele, and in one Neo-Babylonian text. It is not, however, mentioned in Herodotus (Gozzoli 179)

Even if the Babylonian Chronicle for the times of Nebuchadnezzar must have been quite comprehensive, most of it appears, unfortunately, to be lost to posterity. BM 21946 is broken just after introducing Nebuchadnezzar's 11th year campaign into Hatti. We are very lucky therefore that there exists a fragmented text that tells of an attack on Egypt in Nebuchadnezzar's 37th year. Wiseman published new copies of BM 33041, as well as what he thought was a possible related fragment BM 33053 in his edition of the Babylonian Chronicles (Wiseman 1961: 94-95, Pl. XX, Pl. XXI).

Important new insights into this debate were offered by Edel. In a study of the Amasis stele (Edel 1978), he suggests that Apries must have fled to the court of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon for help. Further evidence for this is to be found in the occurrence of the name of Apries in the ‘Weidner Chronicle’ (Edel 1980: 22-25).

CONCLUSION

The present paper discusses Jer. 46.1-12 and Jer. 46.13-28 in order to look into the reliability of the historical information that is found in these two Jeremiah texts. Through comparing these documents to contemporary Mesopotamian and Egyptian sources, some important factual observations may be made. It is suggested that Jer. 46.1-12 contains historically true facts about the battle of Carchemish in 605 BCE. Likewise, Jer. 46.13-28 and Jer. 45.30 contain valuable historical information about Nebuchadnezzar’s invasion into Egypt in his 37th year (568-567 BCE), and about the background for the civil war in Egypt after 570 BCE.

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